

Retrospection as a Soothing Balm: A Study of the Major Novels of Anita Desai



Literature

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Abstract

Human beings always love their freedom like birds. When it is limited by some people in the family, particularly in the case of female, it leads to frustration. Consequently women start to feel neglected alone and don't find themselves quite fit or comfortable in their present circumstances, even among their own people. They expect attention, love and care from their close people. But the failure of their attempt compels them to search for their own identity that has been lost taking on different roles imposed upon them by the family and society. At the result, they easily become victim of tension, worries, disappointment, anxiety, anger, indignation, depression and alienation. Consequently they take resort to retrospection. Anita Desai, through her women characters, explores all aspects of socio and psycho elements in her novels where retrospection plays a great role of a soothing balm.

In Indian English Literature, emotional reaction of sensitive women has been discussed by few distinguished Indian writers. Among them Anita Desai, like Arun Joshi, surfaces layer by layer emotions of Indian sensitive women in her novels. Anita Desai has been greatly appreciated for her commendable and substantial contribution to Indian fiction writing. In fact, she reveals the harsh realities of life, mental turmoil, the chaotic, neurotic, existentialistic nature and the innermost part of her female characters. It's not wrong to say that she is preoccupied with the inner world of her characters rather than their outers. Her female characters suffer from negligence, fear, guilt, jealousy, aggression and alienation. They live in that situation where they lose their peace of mind and are very close to insanity in life. There is also one major problem for them that neither they make others understand their problem nor others can understand their feelings and sentiment on their own. Because of familial and social duties or marital discard women feel alienated. Eventually they render grievances against particular person and society. Sometimes women blame the men for their miserable and deplorable plight.

Anita Desai is perfect artist who deals with feminine sensibilities and other related issues that are concerned with them. The issues which have been treated largely in her novels are love, marriage, divorce, social taboos and inhibitions, cruelty and violence towards the women, problem of rehabilitation after divorce, extent of liberty and freedom to the women, personal identity of women, crisis of conscience and values.

Through the female characterization in her novels Anita Desai surfaces social physical, mental turmoil of her female characters, their critical deplorable circumstances in which they are compelled to survive. Being neglected, ignored and deprived of conjugal love her protagonists take resort to retrospection. For the deeply hurt female protagonists it is a soothing balm. It works as a soothing balm to sooth pang, anguish, wounded psyche and indignation.

In fact in order to take relief from present problems female characters in Anita Desai's novels create their own world. And their world is based on their past life which was led by them happily. They love to live again that happy life in their past memories. They recollect how they were happy some years ago or in their childhood.

Living for a long time in adverse conditions makes women weak and feeble. They fear to face real world with optimism and courage. In fact they have fatigued, suffering, negligence from the people who are very close to their heart. Female protagonists want love and care from male. They make efforts to get these things but all are in vain. The failure of getting love and affection leads them to their frustration. It further leads to anger, anxiety, depression and pessimism.

In depression female protagonists feel alienated and alone in their world. Sometimes they think of committing suicide. In this adverse situation their minds perpetually compares their past happy life with a present life

full of troubles. Consequently they enjoy to memorise their past happy moments, particularly whenever their feelings are hurt by others or they feel disgusted.

Female characters in the novels of Anita Desai want some relief from their present troublesome life. And they find only alternative in the form of retrospection. They forget their present misery and suffering and feel happy for sometime in memorizing their past. After enjoying the past happy life they again muster their power to face problems and to suffer in the present life.

Married female characters in Desai's novels are living in a dilemma. It's impossible for them to survive at their husband's house in the state of violence and absence of conjugal love and respect. They have to suffer physical, mental violence and exploitation. But they also can't leave their husbands' house as it is considered as violation of societal norms for the sake of honour, prestige and respect of their own family and sometimes for the sake of future of their children. They keep tolerating inhuman nature of their husbands for the betterment and welfare of their family members.

Retrospection provides them some temporary relief against their loveless marriage, misery, pang, grievances and troublesome life. In their pensive mood they feel happy. Whenever their outer world hurts their feelings they go in their own created world and feel secure, happy and mental peace.

In fact leading this kind of life infuses in them pessimism. That's why they lose their interest in leading life and mental peace. Some of Anita Desai's female protagonists strive to commit suicide whereas few try to comeback the problems of real life with retrospection. They want to live in their own world full of past happy moments.

Anita Desai focuses on the mental, physical and social oppression of women in the male dominated society irrespective of their class, cast and age. Her characterisation has not been confined to India only. She is even able to understand feelings of women living in foreign countries. She has a far insight to peep into the minds of women, whether they belong to India or London. "The chief women characters of her novels represent Indian women who suffer differently in a patriarchal society. The characters of her novels represent all forms of women: mother, wife, daughter, housewife, working women, social worker and prostitute, and present their real pictures." (Roy 4)

Sarah in *Bye – Bye, Blackbird*, is an English young lady married to Indian man Adit. She feels loneliness even living in her own country. Having married to an Indian man, Adit, she doesn't know about the language, customs, traditions and Indian culture. There is emotional gap between the couple. He doesn't understand her feelings. Now, neither she is a European nor an Indian lady. She can't go back to her own community or people. She feels inferiority complex among Londoners having married to an Indian man. She avoids meeting them, she hesitates to encounter her friends and relatives and neighbours as they look down upon her and will make fun of her or insult her. Since they may ask her about her visit to India and her in-laws and about India too. In fact she feels torn inside, from her heart. She now wants to live in India with her husband and baby so that she could transgress herself into a typical Indian lady and get a perfect identity. There is emotional gap between the couple.

Adit, her husband doesn't understand her feelings. According to her husband, Adit English wives work hard and obey their husbands only when they roar on them once or twice a week.

She feels loneliness when Adit goes with his friends to see them off leaving her (Sarah) at home just after a short party. Even he doesn't share the contents and facts of letters that came from his house in India with her.

She doesn't like to go into her happy and pampered life that was led by her in the past when Adit picks her toys in her parent's house. She asks him not to touch her toys. She is a very bold lady who chooses to touch the future by going to India instead of going back into past days or memories living in London in such circumstances.

Anita Desai has a perfect clutch over the working of mind of Indian women. In all of her novels she makes "an effort to discover, and then to underline, and finally convey the true significance of things." (qtd. Naik 241)

In *Cry, The Peacock*, Maya is a very sensitive woman. Before her marriage she was a much pampered daughter of her rich parents. She used to read fairy tales and was considered as if she were a toy princess in her house.

As a child, I enjoyed, princess-like, a sumptuous fare of the fantasies of the Arabian Nights, the glories and bravado of Indian mythology, long and astounding tales of princes and regal queens, jackals and tigers, and, being my father's daughter, of the lovely English and Irish fairy tales as well, that were read out to me by him,... (Cry, The Peacock 41)

She was brought up by her father especially with plenty of affection, love and care. Therefore, she loves her father very much and aspires to marry the man like her father. She succeeds in her efforts. But after her marriage with the man who is double in her age she leads loveless married life. Her husband doesn't understand her. She is quite young. When she asks her husband anything her husband changes the topic saying it is worldly pleasure. She feels space for a child in her life. She wants to be a mother but she is neglected for it. So, she starts to show her motherhood over her pet dog named Toto. She is underestimated in the family. The members of her family consider her unable to understand intellectual matters and affairs. So, she is considered an inferior person in her in-laws house. She starts to compare her past and present life. Between them she selects her past life that was full of delight. Gradually she starts to slip into it. She memorises all the happy moments spent at her father's house. She likes to dwell into past permanently. In fact she starts to believe that only one, either she or her husband, Gautama will survive according to a prediction. Finally, she decides that it is she, herself who will survive and her husband has to die for the sake of her own life and she pushes her husband from the parapet of the terrace. Under depression Maya is very close to insanity.

Like Maya, Monisha in *Voices In The City*, is a victim of pessimism, alienation and depression. In search of individual identity she leads a life full of frustration and is unable to understand the absurdity of existence. Eventually, she commits suicide. Earlier Monisha had spent her childhood at Kalimpong, happy and unruffled in her brother's company. It included pleasant surrounding and happy domestic life with love and care of her mother. Impact of her happy childhood always remains in her sub-conscious mind. It comes on surface when she comes to be confronted with the dark state of her life.

From the memories of Kalimpong and her childhood she only derives satisfaction and pleasure. Monisha at Kalimpong is governed by emotions and leads a life of freedom and undisturbed calmness. After marriage, she is compelled to lead the life that is extremely opposite of her early life at Kalimpong. So, she shrinks day by day. There is emotional gap between the couple. Monisha demands love in her marital life that is free of rules, obligations, complicity and all stirrings of mind or conscience but unfortunately she does not get it. Hence she is filled with loneliness, fear and pessimism. Besides she is considered as inferior one in the house. There is no place for her peace of mind, solitude and freedom. That's why she memorises her freedom and undisturbed calmness that were integral part of her childhood.

One of Anita Desai's existentialistic female protagonists is Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer*. This novel is concerned with the theme of alienation and discord in married life. Sita is a middle aged lady who, like Maya and Monisha, feels alienated, seeks her husband's love and loses her peace of mind. "From the depths of her memory she brought out a poem of Cavafy's that she kept there like an amulet, etched on the dull metal of her mind, and that she drew out and fondled when she was afraid..." (*Where Shall We Go This Summer* 33).

Like Maya, she is an introvert. She is unable to face the problems in her life because of her inability to accept the values and attitudes of society. Instead of accepting peace Sita rejects the dictates of society. It propels her journey for the sake of free unquestioning love which she hopes would envelope her.

When she confronts the harsh reality to give birth to her fifth baby in a cruel world she withdraws from the outer world and decides to go and stay at Manori Island on the west coast where she had spent her childhood happily. Now she wants to experience again the same pleasure that was experienced by her in her childhood at Manori. There was abundance of free unquestioning love. She wished to be cared and felt the need for nature. She got it in ample measure; as a result there was benevolence attitude in her. Her father looked after her. The island, where she lived, had beauty and magic.

She wants to take advantage of the magical atmosphere and island, and thinks that it is capable to keep her unborn baby safe forever in her womb. Living here she will never give birth to her baby. And in this way she will protect her baby from harsh and cruel world. Island is a source of happiness to her and offers her all the freedom and security that is an inseparable part of her past memories. Sita's withdrawal as well as misbalance is an indication of the need for love, the kind of free unquestioning love.

Nanda Kaul in *Fire On the Mountain* also feels alienated and leads a life as a semi-hermit in the ending of novel. But this type of life is not self chosen by her. Throughout the life she takes on different roles as a wife, mother and grandmother without any complaint. She has no time to take rest but towards the end of the novel, after the marriage of her children she wants freedom from all duties, she wants undisturbed peace of mind and rest. So she makes her mind to live in Carignano, a cottage at Kasauli, a Himalayan village.

In fact she wants to regain again peace of solitude and happiness of her childhood. She had a highly enjoyable childhood. Her childhood days were spent in substantial bliss and calm. Her house was on the bank of the Dal Lake so she rowed about in shikaras. Her father had varied interest and was fond of making experiments in horticulture, travelling and exploring.

When she comes to know that her husband, vice chancellor in Punjab University, has extra marital affair, her feelings are hurt; it slays her personality permanently. So the impact of her (Nanda Kaul's) happy childhood has a great influence on her personality. It gives her temporary relief from the problems of present life.

Bim(la) in *Clear Light of Day*, is another female character who maintains grievances against her own brother who used to share her likes, dislikes and childhood with her happily. Her brother Raja discarded his familial duties towards his younger mental retarded brother, Baba and two younger sisters Bimla and Tara living in a rented house after his marriage with a daughter of their landlord. He wrote a letter to Bimla as a new landlord in which he allowed her to continue her stay with younger sister and brother on the same rent. He promised that he would not increase the rent of the house as Bimla was his sister. Bimla considers this letter as an insulting letter. It hurts her feelings and breaks rope of love and affection with which all brothers and sisters were tied.

In the absence of her brother, Raja she memorises old days spent with Raja, her dear brother. Before his marriage, he used to recite poetry, poetry of Iqbal, went to eat watermelons in fields near bank of river and shared likes and dislikes under the same roof of their house. She, with her brother, also witnessed the indifference and cool attitude of their parents towards themselves as their parents had no time for them.

In the ending of the novel, when Bimla goes to attend the function to house of Mishras sisters, Mulk's guru recites poetry of Iqbal. Having heard the poetry, Bimla goes back to her past, spent with her loving brother, Raja. Iqbal is Raja's one of favourite poets, so Iqbal's poetry reminds her about her brother. Consequently she realizes that she still loves him.

Conclusion

Anita Desai perfectly depicts her characters with their problems and allows them to encounter adverse situations and find out solutions to come out from it on their own. In fact, she takes more interest in the working of inner world than outer ones for her characters. She reveals their wounded psyche, their predicament, sentiments and emotions of Indian women. They are victims of their own circumstances and are unable to face the realities of life. They escape from it and feel happy in their past memories. Anita Desai has a deep and far insight to peep into the heart and mind of Indian women and succeeds to reflect the same through her characters.

In the novels of Anita Desai, her female protagonists take resort to their happy past, old days, childhood and memories to combat with fear, anguish, pang, depression, neurosis, claustrophobia, alienation and physical and mental turmoil. The emotional gap between the couples, extra marital affair of husband, familial duties and unhealthy relationship with husband engender misery in life. Thus, it is retrospection that works as a balm on the wounded psyche of Anita Desai's female characters but its effect is transient.

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